Challenging the Philosophical Presupposition

Gandhi's Unconventional Synthesis of Asceticism and Activism

Those who want to become passive resisters for the service of the country have to observe perfect chastity.

—M. K. Gandhi

The Vedic dharma is verily a twofold path, characterized by *nivṛtti* [renunciation] and *pravṛtti* [worldly engagement], designed to promote order in the world.

—Śri Śaṃkarācārya

At the outset we can assume that there are two kinds of men in Hindu India, those that live in the world and those that have renounced it.

—Louis Dumont

Assessing the Philosophical Problem of Gandhi's Synthesis

Many of Gandhi's predecessors and contemporary religious, social, and political leaders and reformers had combined religious ideas with political, religious, and social reforms. However, Gandhi uniquely sought to directly apply and embody the elements of renunciation—ascetic practices of nonviolence, celibacy, nonpossession—to address the social problems of poverty, untouchability, and gender inequity,

as well as the political problem of India's slavery under the British regime. Therefore, his ascetic practices have been the subject of analysis by a wide variety of hermeneutic techniques—from political to psychoanalytical, as discussed in the introduction. In spite of these scholarly expositions, there remains ambivalence with regard to the underlying mechanics of Gandhi's widely publicized ascetic practices as he related them to his political activism. Perhaps this ambivalence is due to the fact that Gandhi's integration of ascetic practices with his activist agenda has been analyzed against a backdrop of a historically categorical opposition between religious asceticism and politics.

In the secular postmodern era, as in ancient Indian thought, political activism and asceticism—especially the practice of ascetic celibacy—represent two inherently opposite ideologies. Gandhi never explicitly underscored the dichotomy between the religious path of renunciation (*nivṛtti mārga)* and social and political action (*pravṛtti mārga)*; he addressed it only when asked about it.[1] However, he was often reminded by his critics that these ideologies had traditionally reflected divergent paths. For instance in a 1932 letter to Hanumanprasad Poddar, an author and active participant in India's independence movement, Gandhi described his views on the inseparability of these two paths:

> To tread the truth in itself involves entrance into *pravritti*. Without *pravritti* there is no occasion for treading or not treading the path of truth. The holy *Gita* in its several verses has made it clear that a man cannot exist even for a moment without *pravritti*.[2]

In his life and political methods, Gandhi spontaneously integrated secular objectives with his religious pursuit of liberation (*mokṣa)*. He emphasized that "these worldly affairs are not a thing to be looked upon with contempt. It is only through worldly affairs that a vision of the Lord is possible."[3] Gandhi's integration of activism and renunciation is not simply a theoretical puzzle, a problem for the secular critic or activist. This paradox was embedded from its inception in the very ethos of Indian ascetic traditions. Unsurprisingly, many of his religious followers questioned his synthesis.[4] We select the template of asceticism and activism because Gandhi was frequently challenged by his close followers as well as his critics on this topic, and because he so relentlessly negotiated the boundaries of the two.

Gandhi's critics and most scholars find it difficult to establish a logical correspondence between Gandhi's vow of *brahmacarya* and

his active engagement in sociopolitical issues. Some of Gandhi's contemporary religious and political thinkers and leaders, such as Tilak and Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), expressed doubts about his embrace of this twofold ideology. June O'Connor reports that in 1939, in a discussion with his biographer A. B. Purani, "regarding the inherent limitations of Gandhi's tactics, Sri Aurobindo faults Gandhi for 'trying to apply to ordinary life what belongs to spirituality,' suggesting that 'ordinary life' and 'spirituality' are two quite different orders and that consistency between them should not be expected."[5] T. S. Rukmani also describes the paradoxical nature of Gandhi's synthesis, saying that he apparently linked two opposing realms. Gandhi committed himself to a life similar to that of "*saṁnyāsins* and considered the whole world as his family," and desired the religious goal of spiritual liberation. Yet at the same time, she points out, his "energies were solely concentrated on achieving independence for the country and his priority was for winning freedom or *mokṣa* (*svarājya*) for his people from colonial rule."[6]

Unlike traditional yogis, saints, and monks of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism who renounce the mundane reality of social and political spheres, Gandhi was completely engaged in the world, as noted by Gier. Even though Gandhi has been compared to the Buddha, his world-affirming ideology is perceived as contrary to the Buddha's principles. "A critic might say that the most significant difference between the Buddha and Gandhi was that the Buddha was a world-denying ascetic and that Gandhi was not," Gier surmises regarding the sentiments of those who see a difference between Gandhi's and Buddha's ideologies. He quotes a critic who expressed the ideological incoherence between the life of the Buddha and Gandhi: "On the one hand is the tranquil Buddha who walks serenely and calmly across the pages of history," and "on the other hand is the Mahātma, speed and energy in every movement, laughing and sorrowing in his ceaseless endeavour to help mankind with the problems of human life." This is a superficial comparison, as the Buddha was no less a revolutionary. Gandhi himself described the Buddha as an activist deeply involved in social reform. However, as Gier points out, Buddha's methods of social reform and Gandhi's sociopolitical activist strategy were different in nature, and "Gandhi should take sole credit for his own brilliant synthesis of religion and political action."[7] Certainly, Gandhi's casting of the Buddha as an activist was consistent with his own unique interpretations of religious figures and texts. He responded to the renowned scholar and poet, Shri Narasinharao, "When the Buddha with the lamb on his shoulder, went up to the

cruel Brahmins who were engaged in an animal-sacrifice, it was in no soft language that he spoke to them; he was, however, all love at heart."[8] Gandhi did not perceive the Buddha to be a passive ascetic, but a man of action compassionately engaged in confronting unjust social and religious customs of his time.

Even though Gandhi was never affiliated with any institutionalized ascetic traditions, his renunciatory practices were reminiscent of traditional ascetics. The ambiguity surrounding Gandhi's integration of ascetic practices with political actions arises from the ideological split between renunciation and worldly engagement within Indian thought. A brief analysis of these polarized ideologies is needed to establish the framework in which Gandhi's political activism as well as his philosophy have been analyzed by scholars. The purpose of the following discussion is not to elucidate subtle differences between various ascetic orders, nor to afford a historical analysis of asceticism; rather it is to establish the generic context of renunciation in which Gandhi propounded the utility of ascetic practices, specifically *brahmacarya*, for the field of political activism. Gandhi's arena of politics included not only striving for political freedom, but also social, economic, and personal reforms. For this purpose he sought to employ methods such as *ahiṃsā*, *satyagraha*, and *asahyoga* (noncooperation) and propounded their organic unity with *brahmacarya*.

Tracing the Roots of the Paradox

Scholars such as Dumont, Greg Bailey, and Johannes Bronkhorst have expounded on India's tradition of the "renouncer" or ascetic as it stands in "opposition" to the tradition of the "householder." Dumont, an anthropologist, speculates about the way in which the Hindu social structure differentiates between the "man-in-the-world" and the "renouncer": "The renouncer leaves the world behind in order to devote himself to his own liberation." He claims that world-negating tendencies permeate Hinduism: "Asceticism, not only as a way of salvation, but as a general orientation, the tendency towards a negation of the world—ultramundaneity—have deeply imbued Hinduism."[9] However, it has been argued by subsequent scholars that "Dumont's structural dichotomy between the renouncer and the man in the world," on the ground level in Hindu society, "was much more complex and much less tidy" than he presents it.[10]

Greg Bailey, in an eminent essay, highlights the distinctive nature of the ideologies of renunciation and worldly engagement.

"The ancient Indians considered the words *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* to refer both to a distinctive ideology and the life-style informed by that ideology."[11] He emphasizes the contradictory teleological motivations of these disparate methods. The ultimate goals of these two paradigms thus seem to be in opposition. Renunciation leads to transcendence of the conditional world for the purpose of realization of the absolute reality. Conversely, worldly involvement (family, politics, and social conventions) affirms the conditional reality (as perceived in the Advaita Vedānta) of this empirical world of name and form and relationships, by constantly engaging in it. Bailey claims that the ancient Indians considered these two ideologies "to be alternatives, if not opposite poles."[12]

During her discussion of the historical context of the *Mahābhārata*, Dhand also notes the classic dichotomy between the paths of renunciation and worldly engagement: "*Nivṛtti dharma* is envisioned as the structural opposite of *pravṛtti dharma* . . . and is geared radically toward the achievement of personal spiritual ends." After her thorough analysis of these concepts, she concludes that this is the reason that *nivṛtti dharma* is "frequently used as a synonym for *mokṣadharma*, 'the religion of freedom.'" She also examines the *Mahābhārata's* efforts to reconcile "domestic and ascetic ideals."[13] In particular, *The Bhagavad-Gītā* integrates the ideologies of renunciation (*nivṛtti*) and action (*pravṛtti*) through the concepts of *karma yoga* (the path of action) and *karma sannyāsa* (renunciation in action). The *Gītā's* (III: 19) command, "do thou ever perform without attachment the work that thou must do," reconciles the dichotomy. The karmic bondage is transcended through nonattachment to the fruits of actions. It is, thus, not surprising that Gandhi often drew on this text for substantiating his synthesis; however, Gandhi's interpretation of the philosophy of *karma sannyāsa* was unconventional, as he literally adopted elements of renunciation including *brahmacarya* in his political activities, which will be discussed later.

As the scholarship demonstrates, the rigid boundaries between these concepts are debatable; the ascetic literature of India and the epic and living traditions of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist renunciates and laypeople present a more complex picture. Bronkhorst and Bailey describe this norm as prevalent in the ascetic traditions of Hinduism, extending to its heterodox traditions, Jainism and Buddhism. In the social stratification of Hindu society, the *varṇāśrama-dharma*—the codes of conduct (*dharma*) prescribed according to distinct caste (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*)—represent stages of movement from *pravṛtti* to *nivṛtti.* A systematized progression within the *āśrama* system leads

to the goal of ultimate liberation. Three out of the four *āśramas* are marked by renunciatory celibacy. The *Gṛahasthāśrama* (householder state) permits active engagement in society as well as sex and procreation in marriage. Nevertheless, a life of worldly engagement finds ultimate fulfillment not in extraordinary personal and social achievements but in liberation from worldly bondage.

In the Vedāntic traditions, a life of renunciation is superior (*śreyas*) to a life of mundane involvement: even ceremonial acts, for some, are inferior because of *kārmic* constraints. Śaṃkarācārya argues for the superiority of renunciation in light of the lore of *Upaniṣads*.[14] He cites: " 'Beholding the transmigratory life as void of all contents, and desiring to vision the Essence, the celibates, in a mood of supreme detachment, go forth into a life of mendicancy' *Nāradapari. U.* 3. 15."[15] Even in the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma lauds the path of *nivṛtti*: "By acts a living creature is destroyed. . . . Yogins, who see the other side of the ocean of life, never perform acts."[16]

This ideology is also clearly reflected in the heterodox traditions of India. In Jain Dharma, Lord Mahavira propagated a life of extreme renunciation and austerities—including fasting, self-control, and bodily mortification—and declared that all *karmas* (actions) cause bondage. The Buddha himself shunned the world of social relationships and responsibilities to seek a life free from a world ever in flux (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*). Patrick Olivelle notes that the following expression common throughout the Pāli canon reveals the "Buddhist attitude to home life": "The household life is a dusty path full of hindrances, while the ascetic life is like the open sky. It is not easy for a man who lives at home to practice the holy life (*brahmacariya*) in all its fullness, in all its purity, in all its bright perfection."[17] The Buddha also advocates the merit of renunciation: "The thoughtful exert themselves; they do not delight in an abode; like swans who have left their lake they leave their house and home."[18] The Buddha recommends a life of mendicancy to those who are serious seekers of *nirvāṇa* (liberation from the cycle of transmigration and thereby *dukkha*).

In praxis, renunciation requires adherence to a broad trajectory of *vratas* (ascetic vows) such as *ahiṃsa, satya, brahmacarya, asteya* (nonstealing), *aparigraha* (absence of avariciousness), *mauna* (silence), fasting (discipline of food)—all of which pertain to self-control and denial of selfish desires, and lead the way to freedom. Gandhi adhered to most of these practices for the sake of personal discipline and also for the success of his political program. He believed that "it is vain to hope for happiness without undergoing suffering. Thus it is that the life of austerity, the fakir's self-denial and other such prac-

tices have everywhere been held in high esteem and their praises sung."[19] *Pravṛtti*, in contrast, is predicated on the desire for offspring, wealth, and status, thus signifying bondage. For the goal of *nivṛtti*—"emancipation from worldly attachments"—*pravṛtti* is a hindrance. The inherent dichotomy of these two ideologies is found not only in the classical Hindu context, but is also a part of the matrix of *Dharma* traditions in general.

Scholars of Indian asceticism, including G. S. Ghurye, M. G. Bhagat, and Bronkhorst, trace the origins of asceticism and illustrate the characteristics of the ascetic traditions of India. Those who tread the path of *nivṛtti* and practice renunciatory disciplines are assigned various nomenclatures (e.g., *sannyāsin, muni, sādhu, tapasvin, śrāvaka, yogin, mahātmā*, and *parivrājaka*) that correspond to specific types of renunciation; however, in English they are generalized under the term *ascetic*. Semantically, the word *ascetic*, from the Greek *askesis* (implying rigorous techniques of exertion), has been commonly adopted to refer to renunciates who choose a life of severe discipline for spiritual and religious purposes. Although at times attempts are made to differentiate "austerity" from "asceticism," they both translate the Sanskrit term *tapas*.[20] *Tapas*, from the root verb *tap*, literally meaning "heat," came to be used in the sense of austerity, bodily mortification, penance, severe meditation, and focused observance, and in this sense it is cognate with the word *asceticism*. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa identifies himself with *tapas* (austerity).[21] S. Radhakrishnan defines *tapas*:

> *Tapas* is severe self-discipline undertaken for spiritual ends. It is exercised with reference to the natural desires of the body and the distractions of the outer world. It consists of exercises of an inward kind, prayers offered in the heart, self-analysis and outer acts like fasting, self-mortification, sexual abstinence or voluntary poverty.[22]

Within the Indic traditions that form the context of Gandhi's asceticism there have been many shades and grades of ascetics, but an ascetic is generally identified by disengagement from the social world and by a life of self-denial. Gandhi's writings make it evident that he was unconcerned with the distinctive philological and soteriological underpinnings of the different classifications of ascetics. He often used the words, *ascetic, sadhu, saint, seer, tapasvin, yogin, muni, rishi*, and *fakir* interchangeably to refer to those who pledged a life of self-abnegation, sacrifice, and self-mortification (*tapas*) for a higher purpose.

Some political thinkers argue that because engagement in issues of family, society, and, especially, politics is considered this-worldly and a cause of bondage, politics has received very little attention in Indian traditional systems focused on soteriological philosophical discourses. While tracing the foundations of Indian politics, Richard L. Park speculates:

> Political thought, as such, actually received little attention in Vedic times, perhaps because so little importance was given in the philosophic systems to such mundane and essentially transitory matters as politics and government. Through India's long history, political thought did receive serious attention, but the issues raised and the theories propounded tended to be confined to the realm of maintaining law and order. The kernel of the argument was the best means for equating *artha* (public affairs) with *dharma* (cosmic law).[23]

What Park is referring to is the political thought of India which rests on the principles of *dharma* (the duties assigned according to gender, caste, and stage of life) that ordered society, and which is different from the modern notions of politics based on rights and obligations. Nevertheless, political systems were "varied and complex."[24] Historically, some British thinkers were skeptical about "the possibility of self-government" in India. They questioned Indian people's ability to learn political matters, based on a perception that Indians could not understand the political ethos as imagined by Western models. Rudyard Kipling's remarks are worth noting: "They are 4,000 years old out there, much too old to learn that business."[25] Comments such as these arise out of the Aristotelian framework of politics that determines the political trajectory of the Western experience, that is, the idea of a political organization responsible for developing the conditions for the *telos* of human happiness (*eudaimonia*) in secular terms. Social and political systems based on *dharma* (individual and caste obligation) uphold a *telos* of ultimate happiness in the form of liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, not conditional happiness.

Such remarks, however, were counterbalanced by other British personnel who documented India's social and political structures in the nineteenth century. Gandhi published some of the writings of prominent Englishmen who, on landing in India, found "a hoary civilization" that not only furnished the country with "political systems" but also with "social and domestic institutions of the most ramified

description." They also recorded the orderliness in domestic and public life and upright character of Indians.[26] In fact, historically, Indian political theory took two forms: (1) *dharma* texts, where politics is embedded in the normative stratification of the society as a whole; and (2) descriptive exploration of the organization of power in narratives such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It follows that if political thought is about power, organizational dynamics, rulership, nations, or other collectives signified by territory and strategic relationships, then classical India certainly possessed systematic politics. It is unique in that politics was not treated as a specific discipline, and was inextricably linked to religious codes of *dharma* that ordered the internal structures of the society.

Nevertheless, this political framework would pose difficulty in governance in nineteenth-century India, because the political scene was religiously diverse. British and other Western contacts brought new awareness to the ideas of religious customs, equality, and justice. Many individuals trained in Persian, Arabic, and British education systems and affected by foreign critiques of the Indian social classification began to question the status quo (caste, gender, and social norms). Not surprisingly, in spite of India's traditional forms of political institutions and indigenous systems of laws (*dharma*), an engagement with Western political ideologies, such as democracy and nationalistic tendencies, stirred many modern political leaders and reformers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India and gave rise to many reform movements.

While these leaders were influenced by modern Western paradigms of politics and social ideologies, they maintained a high regard for their native religious models. Thus, they sought to link religious reform with political involvement, and individual spiritual liberation with political freedom. Consequently, a politicized version of Hinduism emerged that combined secular elements with religious values. Gandhi's ideology of an independent state (*svarājya*) and his vision of free India were deeply influenced by his predecessors and contemporary thinkers who laid this groundwork. However, Gandhi succeeded in communicating a synthesis of religious values and political ideals through his own personal actions and embodiment. Robert D. Baird's edited volume, *Religion in Modern India*, is a valuable resource providing a comprehensive account of many religious movements and thinkers. These thinkers helped create a constructive vision for India. Consequently, after independence, the Indian "secular state" was defined not as "a Godless State" but one in which no one religion would be privileged.[27]

Gandhi's Blurring of the Boundaries of *Pravṛtti* and *Nivṛtti*

Gandhi's unconventional applications of ascetic practices, which included *ahiṃsā* and *brahmacarya*, brought him into conflict with contemporary Hindu nationalists and orthodox Hindus who were distressed by his use of ascetic methods in politics. Within the Indian cultural milieu, characterized by these two distinct and opposing ideologies of religious pursuit and political aspirations, it becomes apparent that Gandhi's renunciatory practices and active political engagement do not quite fit either of the traditional paradigms. J. T. F. Jordens alleges: "In a tradition where the distinction between the 'renouncer' and the involved 'man-in-the-world' was a basic one, he [Gandhi] strove to be both."[28] However, though Jordens claims that Gandhi strove to be both the renouncer and the man-in-the-world—which makes sense in the traditional ideological context—it cannot be confirmed by Gandhi's own words.

In his introduction to the commentary of the *Gītā*, Gandhi announces that he was not a renouncer, in the sense of a man of *nivṛtti*—withdrawing from the conventional path of action—for the purpose of spiritual pursuit. Alter comments, "Gandhi is very clear in pointing out that renunciation is worthless unless it manifests itself in selfless service and social reform."[29] For Gandhi, a *sādhu* (holy man) is defined by actively participating in solving "political problems." He was disheartened by a general apathy in Indian *sādhus* toward India's social and political issues. In a speech at a public meeting he warned: "As long as sadhus do not lend a hand in solving these problems they cannot have the virtues of a sadhu."[30] At the same time, for his goal of service, Gandhi never aimed to be a "man in the world"; rather he embodied renunciation in every aspect of life. Even though Gandhi was never initiated into any renunciate tradition, he resembled an ascetic more than a householder. In his renunciation, Gandhi sought to acquire internal capacities that would enable him to awaken his people to reject foreign rule.

Was Gandhi's synthesis of ascetic disciplines with worldly political methods and goals a novel idea? Was it philosophically coherent? In spite of the apparent contradiction, the synthesis of asceticism and activism can be located in the ancient philosophical and religious systems of India. According to Indian religious lore, *tapas* is commonly considered one of the spiritual disciplines; however, unlike "asceticism" (in the commonly used sense of the word), it is not always observed for the purpose of "spiritual ends," but also for the sake of "various motives where the ends are not purely material but also

not moral."[31] Hindu myths depict examples of kings and demons, like Rāvaṇa in the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, who gain powers through austerities and use them unscrupulously toward practical ends. J. A. B. van Buitenen elaborates on the notion of *tapas* in the *Mahābhārata*, which he translates as austerities, asceticism, and mortification, and states that "the term comes to describe any specific act of self-deprivation aimed at an increase in spiritual power." He elaborates: "The power thus acquired makes the ascetics a kind of new Gods on earth, rivaling and surpassing the Gods, and divinely unpredictable."[32] Many ancient stories illustrate a rivalry between the material strength of the king and the sage's power of austerities, and they often culminate with victory of spiritual strength over material. Gandhi often told the stories of two legendary sages, Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha. These sages are archetypes of such tension. Viśvāmitra was a king, but after witnessing the supernatural power of asceticism of the sage Vasiṣṭha surpassing the might of his entire army, he seeks to acquire the "superior power" through *tapas*.[33] He turns to extreme austerities: "The fire of concentration seemed to burn and reduce all creation to ashes. The gods appealed to Brahma to stop Viswamitra's austerities."[34] Viśvāmitra performs intense *tapas* to overcome *krodha* (anger), and he finally achieves the highest status of a sage. Gandhi considered these legends "allegorical," but believed in the literal potency of *tapas*, power that he sought to acquire in his personal life through his *brahmacarya*, fasting, and other vows. He publicly transformed these austerities into the methods of nonviolent resistance for confronting the military might of the Empire.[35]

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* describes the different forms of *tapas*, observed for the purpose of securing both spiritual and material goals or as simply a practice of "self-torture."[36] Gandhi made a clear distinction between these various forms of *tapas* (*brahmacarya*, nonviolence, and control in speech, for example) and sought to utilize their acclaimed power as an instrument for acquiring specific worldly objectives. Simultaneously, he adopted the vocabulary of *tapas* for the techniques of nonviolent resistance that required self-suffering.

Furthermore, Rukmani's historical analysis traces various phases of religious and philosophical development in India during which the boundaries of dichotomous ideologies were not rigid. For example, according to Rukmani, the prominent Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara "expanded the functions of a *saṁnyāsin* to include what is known as *lokasaṁgraha*, i.e. action done selflessly for the welfare of the world." She illustrates that Śaṅkara traveled throughout India with the mission of "the spiritual upliftment of the people at large"

and led the way to the ideal of combining the goals of self-liberation and welfare of the people. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this ideal was "enriched at the hands of reformers like Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati et al."[37] Bailey, in his treatment of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* as distinct ideologies, and Dumont, in his discussion of the householder and renouncer, seem to overlook the permeable boundaries between *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, an integration of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* began to be more clearly expressed. Many reformers sought to synthesize the realms of religious and social activism and renunciation. Many of these were *sannyāsins* who were deeply engaged with social and political issues. Reformers of this period who combined religious sentiments with social reforms include Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833)—who devoted himself to rejuvenating Indian culture by reforming politics, education, and social customs—and Swami Ram Tirtha (1873–1906) who propagated a progressive spirituality. Gandhi often referred to these reformers as well as to his contemporaries—such as Shyamji Krishnavarma (1857–1930), Tilak, and G. K. Gokhale (1866–1915).[38] Gandhi was also in contact with Hindu nationalist leaders including Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), who had utilized religious platforms and the rhetoric of celibacy for the purpose of building a Hindu nation and awakening the Indian people to their ancient heritage.

Gandhi claimed that he was not a pioneer in integrating the goal of religious freedom with the ideal of welfare of the world and never claimed to have invented the methods of nonviolent resistance (*satyagraha*) and noncooperation (*asahyoga*) for the ideal of *svarāj*. Although he was unique in popularizing them in the field of political activism, Gandhi admitted that these methods had been introduced by his predecessors.[39] Gokhale had talked of "spiritualizing politics."[40] The objection of philosophical incoherence between the yogic traditions and Gandhi's "this-worldly asceticism" had, therefore, already been addressed to some extent by Indian reformers; Gandhi's synthesis was merely an extension of the earlier formulations. However, Gandhi was unique in constructing his own theories and was also ruthlessly selective and original in interpreting and enacting traditional texts and practices to substantiate his program.

This discussion leads us to the fundamental issue of Gandhi's modus operandi in which, unlike his predecessors or contemporaries, he explicitly advocated ascetic practices, especially *brahmacarya*, as necessary components of his methods to address social and political problems. In other words, it was not entirely unique that Gandhi's

philosophy combined the elements of asceticism and activism, because the flexible parameters of both were traditional, as shown by Rukmani and others. Rather, what was unprecedented was that he sought to transform the elements of renunciation into political "weapons" that could be wielded to achieve the social and political goals of self-rule, improved gender relations, self-reliance, elimination of untouchability, and Hindu–Muslim unity. Moreover, Gandhi broadened the scope of those disciplines from their individual-oriented applications for personal liberation to a communal endeavor for the issues at large.

Gandhi's Use of the "Technology" of *Nivṛtti* for the *Telos* of *Pravṛtti*

Nevertheless, the confusion that scholars point to is visible in Gandhi's own words on this subject of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. It is peculiar that Gandhi, in spite of his title of *mahātmā*, was not a *sādhu* or a *sannyāsin* in the strict, traditional sense of the words. In a 1924 discussion with workers, he declared: "I am not a saint; I am a politician." But he was also not a typical politician. Gandhi explained in an interview, "I have plunged into politics simply in search of Truth." On some occasions while speaking on the subject of his transgression of caste customs, Gandhi would also say that he was a "fakir" and "sannyasi" who was "not bound by social customs."[41] The apparent contradictions, and Gandhi's wavering between the roles of *sādhu* and politician, have caused some scholars and even his contemporary critics to cast him as a "shrewd fellow," and "cunning."[42]

On one hand, Gandhi configured his political actions as religious rituals of *yajña* and *tapas*, and, on the other hand, he prescribed ascetic practices as political methods. This paradox is reflected in Gandhi's choice of words. For example: *ahiṃsā* is "the mightiest weapon" and *satyagraha* is "an all-sided sword."[43] This binary set of propositions, by definition and in practice, is oxymoronic—the prior requires withdrawal, and the latter mandates intense action. Moreover, the practice of *brahmacarya*, which Gandhi deemed compulsory for the purpose of public service, directly relates only to a renunciate. As social anthropologist Peter Phillimore comments, within India's traditions it is not easy to conceive of the practice of celibacy as "divorced from striving for a religious goal."[44] The vow of celibacy generally relates to religious aims. This is usually accurate when the religious ends are differentiated from secular objectives, but Gandhi combined his religious goal with political aspirations as a tactic.

According to Gandhi's own writings, his ascetic methods did not represent the contrived effort of either a *sādhu* or a politician; rather they organically emerged out of his predisposition toward renunciation and service as well as his insight into the superiority of moral power over physical strength and nonviolence over violence. Gandhi realized that he could not command sufficient physical strength to confront the British regime. Instead, he sought in asceticism a defiant force that was an alternative to material and physical strength. His attitude toward extreme self-denial brought him criticism. He answered a correspondent who accused him of having been "an oversexed individual given to excessive indulgence," whose libidinous tendencies seems to have created in him "a sort of disgust towards the sexual act":

> It is wrong to call me an ascetic. The ideals that regulate my life are presented for acceptance by mankind in general. I have arrived at them by gradual evolution. Every step was thought out, well considered, and taken with the greatest deliberation. Both my continence and non-violence were derived from personal experience and became necessary in response to the calls of public duty.[45]

Gandhi was not concerned about securing the title of an "ascetic." Apparently, the underlying difference between Gandhi and an ascetic who chooses austere disciplines for spiritual achievement is that Gandhi prescribed these practices required for a *brahmacārin* as useful tools for nonviolent activism for acquiring the goal of political independence, which he defined as self-rule. Symbolically, the British regime represented the force of unrighteousness, and overcoming it for him required the righteous means sanctified by the religious myths and traditions.

For him, the disciplines of nonviolence and continence had their roots in antiquity, and he discovered their functional value. He claimed himself to be a "practical" visionary, who saw the sum value of any religious observance in terms of its application to the secular and this-worldly. Gandhi intellectually synthesized the goals of *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti* by saying, "I am endeavouring to see God through service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in every one."[46] Thus, each act of confronting injustice and oppression of his people also constituted his *sādhana* (practice, performance, also means of effecting) for God realization.

Indeed, Gandhi was aware of the deep-seated classic bifurcation of the ideologies of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* within his culture. He

often faced tough criticism and even dismissal of his ideas as being "impractical." He once stated in a letter to a young man that it would be "cowardice" to "dismiss" his ideas "by saying that I have renounced the world, that I have turned a sadhu, that my ideas are good but impracticable." Gandhi insisted that he was a "practical man."[47] Although his synthesis to some extent carried on a trend begun by his immediate political predecessors as well as some of his contemporaries, Gandhi's political aspirations for Western ideals of democracy, gender and caste equity, and political freedom were original. The means of *ahiṃsā, satya, brahmacarya,* fasting, and poverty became tangible tools for political ends.

Gandhi selectively chose vocabulary and analogies to make his synthesis plausible. For example, he transposed the mundane goal of political independence into the ideal of *svarājya,* which he construed not simply as "self-rule" but as *rāmarājya* (the mythical kingdom of Lord Rāma) and *dharmarājya* (kingdom of righteousness). In a 1921 meeting, he called on *sādhus* to act as volunteers and participate in the social and political reform to reclaim *rāmarājya* with "divine weapons like *yama-niyamas* [restraints and observances traditionally undertaken for spiritual evolution]." He suggested to them that "with just a little practice, you can make these weapons effective." He not only redefined the ideal of a *sannyāsin* and *sādhu,* but also the disciplines of withdrawal.[48] *The yama-niyamas* are traditionally placid disciplines, but their practice requires immense willpower and is believed to yield supernatural powers. Speaking at a meeting of *sādhus,* Gandhi ascertained that if he could practice truth, nonviolence, and *brahmacarya* to perfection, he "would be in possession today of all the supernatural powers they speak of . . . the world would be at my feet and no one would ever want to laugh me out or treat me with contempt."[49]

Whenever Gandhi spoke of the power of ascetic practices, he also recounted their utility for personal discipline and public "purification," for the practice of self-restraint as well as for *svarājya.* He pitted the power of asceticism against armed power. The struggle for *svarājya* by nonviolent methods necessitated that Gandhi and his followers endure physical and emotional hardships such as imprisonment, flogging, and insult. Gandhi's call for the comprehensive practice of ascetic restraint on the part of Indians may have also been directed at Indians working for the regime who were physically involved in intimidating their countrymen.[50] Gandhi also found that the austere life of jail was comparable to the regimen voluntarily observed by a *brahmacārin*: "My first experience of jail life was in 1908. I saw that some of the regulations that the prisoners had to observe were such as should be voluntarily observed by a *brahmachari,* that is,

one desiring to practice self-restraint." He concluded that "when they [disciplines] are self-imposed, they have decidedly salutary effect."[51] Gandhi recognized the practical implication of ascetic disciplines and began emphasizing for his *satyagraha* movement its symbolic value in inspiring the masses for social action.

Gandhi's approach may have been religious in nature, but it was political in strategizing the struggle for independence. For example, he interpreted methods of *satyagraha, ahiṃsā, asahyoga* (noncoopera-tion), and *swadeshi* (home-grown goods or self-reliance) as ascetic and ritualistic practices, but directed them toward acquiring sociopoliti-cal goals. Even though Gandhi sought to create a functional plan by combining two apparently different ideologies, he needed to con-struct a coherent narrative to communicate his strategy and mobilize the masses, conditioned as they were by the tradition of polarized ideologies. Gandhi never claimed to be a scholar, but for his practi-cal purposes he selectively chose texts and models and interpreted them to construct ontological, ethical, mythical, and political theories. Gandhi drew on selected philosophical texts and paradigms within the traditional lore to support his synthesis of these two ideologies, which for him represented complementary rather than contradictory principles. He sought to create a plausible narrative, which utilized the vocabulary and models of the religious traditions of India, yet ideologically defied the norm.